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ABSTRACT

Teachers need to become students again and pay attention to how they learn best in order that they may then use like means in teaching their students. Teacher students often connect by telling anecdotes and other narratives that have meaning in their personal experiences. They share these stories and build on them, finding fresh ways of looking at things that they deal with as teachers of reading and writing. A teacher's anecdotes serve not as classical prescriptions on how to discourse but rather as modern rhetoric's emphasis on the expressive powers, accepting that knowledge cannot be divorced from knowers. They also serve as a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Processing, not control, is the heart of learning; students are more likely to make sense of a simple fragment that challenges their understanding than complexity which can only be recalled vaguely. Since knowledge comes from experience, the only way they can hope to understand another person's ideas is to try to share the experience. Authority in connected knowing rests not on power or status or certification but in commonality of experience. (Sixteen references are attached.) (MG)

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Practice What We Teach:

Narratives of Teacher Students

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During the summer of 1990, I attended a graduate class in the "Rhetorical Tradition and the Teaching of Writing." Much of the class as I perceived it revolved around the apparent dichotomy between classical and modern rhetoric. Perhaps as interesting as the content of the course were the methods we (English teachers all) used to make sense of the readings for the course.

As a participant observer I realized that the overwhelming way we "connected" was by telling anecdotes and other narratives that had meaning in our personal experience. We shared these stories and built upon them, sometimes sticking to the topic of the reading, more often staying into related areas but always finding fresh ways of looking at things we deal with as teachers of reading and writing.

Thus, this paper consists of transcriptions of our class discussions interspersed with words of wisdom from our readings and related sources. Some of these words of wisdom comment on the heuristic nature of the narrative itself; others interweave with the content of our dialogues.

Within this framework lies the call for teachers to again become students and to pay attention to how <u>they</u> learn best in order that they may then use like

means in teaching their students.

Anecdotes, one of our most frequently used means of connecting, "offer particular examples and general precepts in conjunction; seeing the relationship of the two is a lesson in concept formation" (Berthoff, 1981, p. 87). Anecdotes help us tap into our subjective knowledge and to construct knowledge from others' shared experiences. They're contextual, created, a perspective both personal and public, intuitive and "justified" socially. "The most fundamental mode of human communication is telling stories" (Macrorie, 1988, p.98).

Mark: What were you thinking about as you read Knoblauch & Brannon ...were you saying "yeah" or "boo"?

Kate: Well, I agree with them but I think they're long on criticism and short on workable alternatives. I wrote in the margin, "get real...when's the last time you taught in a public highschool?" I mean, I agree that the teacher's attitude sets the stage but I teach five classes a day, five days a week, with thirty-five in a class, where the kids come in and say, 'Man, why do we have to do this shit?'

Jeanne: Lil Brannon did teach in a highschool. I saw a presentation where she brought examples from teacher's classrooms. I think she is in touch with classrooms.

Our anecdotes serve not as classical prescriptions on <u>how</u> to discourse but rather modern rhetoric's emphasis on the expressive powers, accepting that knowledge can't be divorced from knowers.

They also provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar. They exercise memory. They're a good starting point because all students can be actively engaged in making meaning. Meaning is created when we see relationships between each other's narratives (Berthoff, 1981).

Janine: (discussing the rift between classical and modern rhetoric) It dichotomizes. We were talking about this outside. I'm not sure I agree that you have to deny classical rhetoric. I guess I believe there are some truths above all things...Can we say, 'here are some things we can retain, here are some good points?'

"The authority of individual creation can coexist with the authority of consensus" (Gere, 1987, p. x). How our dialogues progress depends on who we practice with. "I see the student as active agent, trying to make sense of experiences. Roots go back through the teaching styles...Plato even claims in the Thaetetus that Socrates saw himself not as a teacher but as a midwife for ideas...a mediator and facilitator" (Mason, 1988, p. 207). Dialogues are a place where "half-baked emergent ideas can grow" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 144). "Experience must be re-cognized, re-presented, and interpreted if it is to have pedagogical value" (Berthoff, 1981, p.364).

Kate: Well, I guess I've been a "closet classicist". It seems to me that a lot of this classical stuff could be modern if we did it from their (modern

rhetoricians) theoretical standpoint. Like, it's OK to use personal narrative if it's the students who choose to use that form. What do you guys think?

Annette: Unstructure is still structure...it's just that the students impose it on themselves.

Eric: They say there's an intellectual continuum ...there's the tendency to blend ancient and modern rhetoric together. For some of us, isn't it true, once we see something that works, whether it's ancient or not, isn't is useful? Is this too fragmented?

The essence of fragments in our converstations is that they are recallable...The role of local construing is what makes an incident recallable. Students are more likely to make sense of a simple fragment that challenges their understanding than complexity which can only be recalled vaguely. Processing, not control, is the heart of learning (Mason, 1988). Students are also accustomed to talking to each other as a means of learning. Conversations are stimuli to "the deep, natural, human need to order things by means of symbolic action" (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984, p. 110).

Mark: Our personal histories influence our academic lives. It would be a wonderful way for us to spend a class period--go around and talk about our past and how that influences where we are.

Annette: My past and my experience looking at education--it influences how I teach composition,especially the process writing.

Mark C: I did something very similar. As a first year teacher last year my whole basis was to decide to argue the way writing has traditionally been taught--the way I was taught and how my writing was evaluated for so many years. I figured I was in no position to make any kind of argument or to

rebel. And I'm finding with these theories my goals are changing quickly and I'm uncomfortable.

In classical rhetoric the will of the orator is imposed on others. In modern rhetoric, speakers seek harmony and connectedness rather than "victory." Acceptance of this kind of connectedness between knowledge and discourse owes its origins to Foucault's "periods of radical epistemological disjunction"--philosophical upheavals of the past four centuries (Knoblauch, 1985, p. 35). Part of the acceptance of either rhetoric has to do with the political climate of the times and how much control teachers are supposed to have over their students. If our intention is to share, as the dialogue above illustrates, this sets the stage for further sharing. We pull from our store of interpreted experience. Then we connect to a "felt quality" of experiencing--a contemplative act revealing further coherence and fresh patterns (Britton, 1980, p.65).

Bob: (on evaluation) They said students will write better when they mature as writers and it would be foolish on your part to think there's anything you can do. The suggestion is trash all evaluation--it's based on all sorts of subjective biases. Again, when you're teaching in a highschool, I can see me going into the principal's and saying 'Knoblauch & Brannon say you can't measure writing so I can't give grades.'

Kate: Well, I'm in a neat position this year with this alternative program and I'm almost ready to buy this but it scares me. I mean, here's this slim

little volume, no profanity, it looks very safe, but I think it's extremely radical.

The pedagogical implication of using anecdotes and other spontaneous forms of personal narrative means rejecting the classical rhetorician's authority. By legitimizing constructed knowledge, we're rethinking what Joy Ritchie calls the "margin of power": a vantage point to see ourselves and our students more clearly...to dialogue, to transform. "In 'real talk' domination is absent, reciprocity and cooperation are prominent" (Belenky, p. 146). Sharing anecdotes and other personal narratives means not beginning with the teacher's prepared knowledge.

Jane: It has a lot to do with how you view yourself as a teacher. I used to teach like a "banker" and as soon as I got over that hump thinking of myself as putting in knowledge then my perspective changed. It took me a long time to get away from objective testing. I feel as a teacher as an oppressed person because the administration oppresses me. I have to produce a product.

Freire tells us that "education is communication and dialogue" (1989, p. 139). And Perry tells us that shifting from adherence to an absolute, outside authority to the relative authority within us is development. The deflation of authority can be a powerful learning experience (Belenky, 1986). Educators can contine to learn. The humbler they are the more they'll learn (Freire, 1989).

Jeanne: I don't think you have to say Knoblauch & Brannon say this, I think you can say Paul Diederich, Mr. ETS himself says this. Everybody says it's just terribly unfair. I think what Knoblauch & Brannon are saying is the system's got to change.

Instead of "preparing our students for the real world" (what are they living in now, anyway?) why not let our students bring their real world into the classroom? "Students already possess sufficient linguistic resources to make valuable, personal meanings right at the start" (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984, p. 101). But classical rhetoric has viewed style as "laid on" to the thoughts which invention has provided, rather than integral to the whole speech (Kennedy, 1980).

Esther: (on evaluation) You can take risks and revise, but those aren't things you can really measure.
Janine: When it came time to put a letter grade on their work, I felt like a total jerk--it went against everything I'd learned.

The implications of this kind of control go beyond teaching. Philosophy, religion, economics, nationalism, sexism, racism--so many given fundamentals that so many seek to preserve because they have a vested interest in them--these are things we've absorbed unconsciously. And many teachers fall into this category. "We have a tendency to keep the game as

it is, particularly if we have been winning. Power, control, and admiration are not easy to share" (Giroux, 1987, p. 18-19).

Jeanne: Something I object to even more is tracking students. If I object to tracking them in first grade why should I object less to tracking them in college? It deprives people of seeing people at different levels. I can't imagine why the NAACP hasn't objected to tracking students and they haven't. You go into any school and it's exactly what Bob described. We have integrated schools with segregated classes. And it's all justified by standardized testing.

We could put aside positivism, which has become a crutch and a millstone (Berthoff, 1981). Literacy could be a facility in making meaning in reading and writing, understanding the heuristic powers of language itself. But some "discourse communities are organized around the production and legitimation of particular forms of knowledge and social practice at the expense of others, and they are not ideologically innocent" (Chase, 1988, p.13).

Even our more rigid teacher certification standards are an attempt to reinforce our authority as guardians of knowledge. What values are we passing along when we ourselves are subject to tests which seek to quantify our "knowledge"?

Kate: Well, I think it's ironic that we're all for questioning the authority of tradition but here we're relying on these new theories to give

us another kind of authority in our teaching.

Will modern rhetoric lead us into a new era of academic credibility? The desire to impose order on a chaotic world is reflected in our religions, philosophies, and pedagogies. Perhaps the more fearful we are, the more we crave order. We want to teach "logic and coherence" (Stewart, 1988, p. 21). At least, awareness of the philosophical issues associated with rhetoric can help us avoid positivism out of ignorance.

> Mark C.: It's scary. I'm trying to think if we allow the students to develop their own voice and how we affect their lives. I'm struggling with it right now. If they aren't able to write that five paragraph essay, will they be able to get into college, will they be successful? I can't answer that.

We cite classical rhetoric as the source of the five paragraph essay. Aristotle believed in logic, and that to the classical mind language was reality: any interpretation clouded the mirror (Knoblauch, 1985). But Plato recognized that forms of expression cannot be separated from personal knowledge of a subject in truth. And Locke's theory was that of associated ideas. And Coleridge saw the coalescence of subject and object. Even Cicero and Quintilian stressed the need to look at other's points of view, to incorporate

into the forming of your own (Knoblauch, 1985). Why do we give such credence to one kind of classical rhetoric--the kind that demands that five paragraph essay? According to Socrates, "any discourse ought to be constructed like a living creature" (Stewart, 1988, p.18). But much of our concern comes from what other teachers will think:

Jeanne: If we teach students to develop their own process, their own strategies and teach them a variety of approaches, help them think about how they write then they might be able to cope with the kinds of teachers who might be very rigid and formal.

Esther: Well, and that's life; that's reality. They'll still be better off going into that class with confidence.

Mark: I have a couple of misgivings. Maybe I'm brutal but I've come to trust my students' ability to play the game. I don't believe in teaching for what I consider the most ill-informed of my colleagues. If I talk to them about political realities, they don't really take that kind of knowledge with them.

Teachers who advocate connected learning run risks within their classroom and from authoritative administrations. Going into terra incognita is not as safe as a prepared lecture or worksheet. Authority in connected knowing rests not on power or status or certification but in commonality of experience (Belenky, 1986). In any case,

> Whatever policy makers decide, students will go on constructing their own voices in response to the

> conditions they find in the community, school, and the rest of the world. If we learn to understand and acknowledge these cultural processes, we might even learn to facilitate them instead of frustrating them (Sola & Bennett, 1985, p. 108).

David: We're realists and we're idealists. Our burnout is a reflection of our dichotomy.

When we're realists are we subjects? When we're idealists are we objects? The dichotomy between rhetorics affects us personally. "To be a self is to be, not an object, but the subject of one's own experiencing" (Jourard, 1971, p. 4). Or, as Berthoff says, becoming a subject invites us to recognize that we are representative of humanity. "For teachers, it means a liberation from tired isolation" (p. 368).

Esther: But in the end, isn't it still my reality? It gets constructed by others but it's still mine. I wrote in the margin, "we exit alone."

We questioned whether others can really know what we know and how we feel. "Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people's knowledge. Since knowledge comes from experience, the only way they can hope to understand another person's ideas is to try to share the experience" (Belenky, p. 113).

Jeanne: Your reality is not my reality and truths are only truths in context.

"The word 'I' is the true shibboleth of humanity. How dissonant the I of the ego sounds! But how beautiful and legitimate the vivid and emphatic I of Socrates sounds! It is the I of infinite conversation" (Buber, 1970, p. 115).

We can think because we can talk. According to Gere (1987), becoming literate means "joining a specific community through understanding the issues it considers important and developing the capacity to participate in conversations about those issues" (p. x). Now that we teachers have seen this work for us in our student roles, shouldn't we offer our students the same opportunities?

Jane: Sorry, I interrupted your train of thought.
Mark: I was on a train but it had no particular destination.

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